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Teleconference With the B'nai B'rith Convention

August 24, 1994

The President. Thank you very much, President Schiner, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for that very warm greeting. And I certainly can identify with the tension of waiting for election results to come in. I'm very glad to be with you today, if not in body then very much in spirit.

It's an honor to address the international convention of an organization that has done so much for our country. I understand that, along with delegates from 40 of our 50 States, there are among you representatives from 36 nations. I want each of you to know this country's gratitude for the extraordinary work B'nai B'rith has performed since its founding in 1843. Your tireless dedication to community service, health, education, and housing for the elderly, and your staunch opposition to bigotry of any kind long ago earned our respect and our thanks.

Allow me to add my voice to the chorus saluting Kent Schiner as he steps down after 4 distinguished years as your president. Kent joined Hillary—or hosted Hillary and me—at the Jefferson Memorial last October when B'nai B'rith celebrated its 150th anniversary. I admire anyone who survives and thrives for a full term as president. So congratulations to you, Kent, on a job well done.

This is a remarkably exciting time, both at home and abroad for issues of particular concern to B'nai B'rith and to me. At home we're on the verge of winning the fight to make our streets safer for law-abiding Americans. We're closer to the day when health care will no longer be a privilege for some but a right for all. Our economy is recovering—over 4 million new jobs in the last year and a half. We're moving in the right direction at home. Abroad we've witnessed progress in one year toward peace in the Middle East that can literally take our breath away. And let me say a few words on these subjects.

This past weekend, Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives joined in an unprecedented effort to set aside the petty concerns of partisan politics and acted quickly to address the real concerns of real people about crime. Not only did they pass a crime bill that the American people desperately want and need, but they showed the bipartisan spirit and good faith we desperately need here in Washington to make this National Government work again.

Now the Senate has a chance to follow suit, to pass the toughest, smartest, most bipartisan crime bill in our Nation's history, a bill built on bipartisan roots of the crime bill that Republicans and Democrats in the Senate passed late last year by a vote of 95 to 4.

This bill is centrist and bipartisan to its very bones: 100,000 new police officers, billions more for prisons, "three strikes and you're out," prohibiting juveniles from owning handguns, a ban on deadly assault weapons, and much needed and working crime prevention programs, and a massive cut in the Federal bureaucracy to pay for these crime-fighting efforts. That's right. We're reducing the Federal bureaucracy to its smallest size since the Kennedy Presidency and putting all the savings into a trust fund to pay for the crime bill. These aren't Democratic or Republican ideas; they are common-sense solutions that the American people support because they can really make a difference against crime and violence now and in the future.

For 6 years, the American people have waited while Congress debated a crime bill, even as they watched the average violent criminal go free in just 4 years. It's time to act now. This is about keeping faith with the millions upon millions of American families who work hard, pay the taxes, obey the laws, and don't ask very much from our Government, but they do want to raise their children in a country that is safe and secure.

The American people don't want a criminal justice system that makes excuses for criminals. They also are tired of a political system that makes excuses for politicians. It's time to put away the excuses, the blames, and the politics and join forces to pass this crime bill now. And I urge all of you to call

your Senators, without regard to party, and tell them just that.

For many years now, B'nai B'rith has been a leader in providing health care to all kinds of Americans. When I spoke to you at the Jefferson Memorial I described the hospital you opened in my home town of Hot Springs, Arkansas, some 90 years ago. The Leo N. Levi Hospital still cares for hundreds of people every year without regard to their ability to pay. That same generous spirit should animate our national health care system.

After 60 years of trying, we're closer than ever to providing health security for all Americans. For the first time in our history, both the House and the Senate are considering comprehensive and effective health reform measures. These efforts are long overdue. Health costs are too high and rising too fast. Coverage is actually shrinking in America. Millions in the middle class are losing their insurance every year, many of them for good. There are 5 million working Americans and their children who don't have health insurance today who had it just 5 years ago.

Meeting this challenge requires more from us than politics as usual. This again shouldn't be about politics or special interests. It should be about putting the interests of our families, our Nation, and our future first. I believe we can do it if we'll leave aside ideology and partisanship and follow the example that the House did Sunday in passing the crime bill. To do it, we'll have to join together to stand up to some intense pressures to guarantee that every American has solid, affordable, private health insurance. Every other major advanced country has done it. It's time for America to do the same.

Lastly, let me say I know you share the joy that I feel in the progress that's been made toward peace in the Middle East. For more than four decades, Americans have identified with and supported Israel's struggle for survival and acceptance in a hostile region. Now, after so much bloodshed, so many lost opportunities, Arabs and Israelis are reaching out to each other to settle their differences through conciliation, compromise, and peaceful coexistence.

Some of you were on the South Lawn of the White House to witness the historic handshake between Chairman Arafat and

Prime Minister Rabin. And some of you joined us in the Rose Garden when King Hussein and the Prime Minister showed the world what warm peace can mean in the Middle East. I hope and I believe that the time is not far off when we'll see a comprehensive peace in the region, a peace that binds Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, Syrians, and Lebanese so that all their children can know a better future.

The United States has been proud to serve as a full partner in the search for peace, not by imposing peace or making life-and-death decisions for others; that must be the responsibility of the leaders and the people of the region. Rather, our role is to facilitate negotiated compromise and to underwrite reasonable risk-taking. And that is exactly what we've done.

I applaud the bold steps that Israel has taken, and I salute the courage of the Arab leaders who have stood up to the scurrilous charge that they are somehow selling out the Arab cause by securing for their own people a future of peace, prosperity, and hope.

Now we must demonstrate that the international community supports this courage and ensure that the people of the region realize the full benefits of these peacemaking efforts. At the same time, we have a right to expect that all the participants in the peace process live up to the commitments they've made. In this regard, it's heartening to hear from many Palestinians their genuine desire for democratic elections, representative government, and transparent and accountable institutions. These things they need, and they deserve nothing less.

As we move ahead in the peace process, we need to keep in mind some basic principles. First, peace must be real, not just the absence of war but a qualitative change in the relations between Israel and its neighbors: full diplomatic ties, an end to the boycott, open borders for people in trade, joint economic projects. And it would be inconsistent with real peace for any of the parties to host or sponsor those who reject accommodation with Israel, especially terrorist groups.

Second, peace must be secure. The parties themselves must reach agreement that provides for mutual security. In the case of the Israel-Syria negotiations, this administration,

following consultations with Congress, stands ready to participate in the arrangements these parties reach. And just as this administration has acted to sustain and enhance Israel's qualitative military edge, so, too, it will help to compensate for any strategic advantages Israel may choose to give up for peace.

Finally, peace must be comprehensive. We will work hard to achieve breakthroughs in the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. And when we do, we'll also expect the wider Arab and Muslim worlds to normalize their relations with Israel. Let me emphasize here that we're committed to bringing the Arab boycott of Israel to an end now.

First of all, the boycott harms American companies, and it has no place in the peace process. Through the Gaza-Jericho accord and the transfer of authority elsewhere in the territories, the Palestinians have entered into a new economic relationship with Israel. Continuing the boycott harms not only Israel but the Palestinians as well. At the same time the Washington Declaration affirms that the abolition of all boycotts is the shared goal of Israel and Jordan. With serious progress being made on the Syria negotiating track, retaining this relic of a bygone era cannot possibly be justified. The boycott must be ended.

Building peace is extraordinarily hard work. We know that the dark forces of hatred and terror remain deeply entrenched. In recent weeks, terrible attacks against Jews in Argentina, Panama, and England have underscored the heinous acts some will commit to undermine this peace process.

Among you today are members of those communities, including Joseph Harari from Panama, who lost a nephew on the plane that was bombed from the skies over his country. Mr. Harari, I pledge to you and to everyone else in this room, we'll do all that we can to help bring the perpetrators of this crime and the other crimes to justice. Our policy is clear: to weaken and isolate those who reject a more peaceful future for the peoples of the troubled region.

Two key obstacles of that future are Iraq and Iran and the radical groups they continue to support. In the case of Iraq, we must maintain the international consensus in favor of strict sanctions. This clear expression of

international will has compelled Saddam Hussein finally to begin to cooperate with U.N. weapons inspectors. But the true nature of Saddam's regime remains clear. Relief workers and weapons inspectors face constant harassment and intimidation. Terrorism plagues the Iraqi people. Witness last month's tragic death of a prominent Shiite leader, the summary executions of bank managers, and the recent assassination of an Iraqi dissident in Beirut by Iraqis credited as diplomats. Baghdad still refuses to recognize the sovereignty and borders of Kuwait. And the regime continues to destroy the lives of the marsh Arabs of southern Iraq. These facts serve as reminders of why we must and why we will maintain the sanctions.

Of equal importance is our effort to contain Iran, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, the pledge to work with like-minded countries to meet the challenge of Iran's support for terrorist groups, its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, and its campaign to subvert moderate regimes that have opted for peace. We must do this. We call upon all our allies to recognize the true nature of Iranian intentions and to help us convince Tehran that we will not tolerate rogue behavior.

Now let me conclude on a happier and more positive note. It's been said that unless a person is a recipient of charity, he or she should be a contributor to it. Your work through B'nai B'rith gives life to that generous thought. So this week, as you reflect on your wonderful acts of community service and plan new ones, let me once again express the gratitude of our Nation for all you've done and all that you will do.

Thank you very much.

Terrorism

[At this point, Mr. Schiner thanked the President for the efforts he has made to promote peace in the Middle East and to address the problems of health care and crime. Jorge Serejski, president of B'nai B'rith in Argentina, then asked the President what the administration can and will do to combat domestic and international acts of terrorism.]

The President. Let me tell you what we are doing. First of all, you can see from the results of our efforts to solve the World

Trade Center bombing case that we are very aggressive in pursuing these cases. We are intensifying our international cooperation, working with Argentina, Great Britain, and Panama, and other countries, to try to help resolve who did these terrible acts of terrorism and apprehend the perpetrators.

In addition to that, we are increasing our cooperation through intelligence and law enforcement services with countries throughout the globe to try to prevent such acts from occurring in the first place. So we're trying to intensify our efforts at prevention and intensify our efforts at catching people when they do these terrible things.

And I think we will have some considerable success. But we must not be naive. There are a lot of people who have a big, vested interest in the continued misery of people in the Middle East, the continued anxiety of Arabs, and particularly Palestinians and others. And they hate the fact that peace is winning converts and making progress.

So as we move through the peace process, if we continue to have success, the enemies of peace will continue to look for opportunities to make innocent people pay the price, so that they can continue to make money and accumulate political power on the human misery that has dominated the Middle East for decades. So they'll be there, but we're doing what we can, and we are putting more resources into the effort to stop them before they do it and to catch and punish them if we're unsuccessful in stopping them in the first place.

Health Care Reform

[Janet Weissberg, a health care consultant, expressed her concern that some Senators have proposed a health care bill that would greatly reduce coverage for long-term care and eliminate coverage for prescription drugs. She asked the President about his commitment to these services.]

The President. Well, my commitment is just as broad as it ever was. I think the provision of the prescription drugs, the long-term care is very important.

But let me inject a little political reality here. The real problem is that we have Members of the United States Senate, including some people who've been very good friends

of B'nai B'rith, who are walking away from what is the only known way to provide universal coverage, control cost increases in the out years, and still generate enough money to provide these services, which is simply to require all employers and employees to provide insurance and then provide discounts to those who can't afford to pay the full cost.

Once you say we're giving up on the requirement that employers provide health insurance and their employees help to pay for it—even in 5 years or 6 years from now, in the so-called hard trigger that Senator Mitchell advocated—once you walk away from that, then you find the Senate basically getting into taxes and Government regulation to try to raise a huge amount of money from people who are already paying for their health insurance and already have good health insurance to go throw it at people who have insisted on not being asked to do anything on their own in the hope that they can induce them with somebody else's money to do something they ought to do anyway. And that leaves less money for prescription drugs and long-term care.

Now, that's basically what's happened. This whole debate has been mischaracterized. I think that our position is the essentially conservative one, where we simply ask everybody to do their part, since they're benefiting from the health care system, and buy private health insurance and then help them if they can't afford to buy it at the full price. But everybody's asked to do something.

The so-called moderate and conservative people are trying to find ways to raise money from people who are already doing their part to basically overly subsidize people who don't have insurance and employers who could afford to pay and don't, in the hope that they can plead with them to do something that they're unwilling to require in the law. And that is the nub of all of our other problems.

If you're asking me where I am, I am still where I always was. I will do my very best to provide it. I talked to a Member of the Congress today who needed some long-term care at home for an ailing parent. We need to do this. We need it desperately. But I would urge you to talk to the Members of Congress in both parties who have been your

friends and ask them to look at the real world, instead of the kind of ideological box that they have put themselves in, and do something that will work.

The main thing we must do is we must do something that will work. And it would be better not to do anything at all than to adopt a program that would actually increase costs of health care and reduce coverage. That's what we don't want to do.

Middle East Peace Process

[Irving Silver, chairman of the B'nai B'rith Center for Public Policy, asked the President what the administration is doing to impress upon Yasser Arafat and the PLO that their agreement with Israel can only succeed if they accept the spirit as well as the letter of its provisions.]

The President. Well, we're telling him just what you said, and we're doing it on a regular basis. The Secretary of State's in constant contact with Mr. Arafat. We are working with the PLO people. We understood all along that because they had never actually run a country before and operated a government and all of its manifestations, with all of its problems, that there would be more difficulties here, operational difficulties, in making the agreement actually work. But we are working hard on that. And we're also trying to provide assistance and support as well as pressure when that will help to get them to do what they're supposed to do.

We've also been very blessed in having a group of Jewish-American and Arab-American business people who are working together and are prepared to make some investments in those areas if we can get the PLO in a position where they can actually effectively function and implement this.

So I believe that the biggest problem is one of capacity. And I think the limited capacity is undermining the question of will from time to time. We just have to keep the pressure on and also have to keep working practically to increase the capacity for this agreement to be implemented by the PLO.

Mr. Schiner. Again, Mr. President, on behalf of the half million people and members who affiliate with B'nai B'rith in 51 countries, on 6 continents, we thank you for your warm

greeting and your important message. Thank you again.

The President. Thank you very much, Kent. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:40 p.m. from Room 459 of the Old Executive Office Building.

Interview With Gene Burns of WOR Radio, New York City

August 24, 1994

The President. Glad to be here, Gene.

Mr. Burns. Do you feel like Daniel in the mouth of the lion's den? You and talk radio these days seem to have this running battle.

The President. We were talking before we went on the air; I really have always enjoyed talk radio and I've done a lot of it, particularly when I was Governor, and in my campaign I did a lot. I find that there's a certain immediacy to it that I like. I like the interviews and I like people being able to call in a question.

Administration Accomplishments and Goals

Mr. Burns. George Stephanopoulos was here earlier, and he says in his view—and I assume he mirrors your own—your accomplishments in your first almost 2 years as President have not gotten through the screen of the media to the American people. Do you feel any sense of isolation here in terms of what you like, you've told us, that sort of one-on-one relationship with constituents?

The President. Oh, yes. I think part of it is the nature of the Presidency and the whole security bubble that's around the President. Part of it is the demanding nature of the job and the fact that Washington, DC, and its inner workings are a long way from the average life of most Americans. And part of it is the way news is reported today. News basically tends to be—a lot of studies have shown that the way news is reported tends to be more negative and more editorial, more commentary rather than what's going on.

A lot of the research shows that the American people are surprised to find out that in 1993, for example, I had more success in getting a very big program through Congress, with the economic program and NAFTA and